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Rapid research COVID-19
Community responses to COVID-19: Sustaining community action

Angela Ellis Paine, Angus McCabe (TSRC), Wendy Sugarman and Lekey Leidecker (WSA Community Consultants)

SYNOPSIS: There is a growing body of evidence on how communities have responded to COVID-19, highlighting an early surge in community action and the subsequent power of communities to meet the needs of residents during crises. More recently, however, as the pandemic has continued longer than anyone imagined, there is increasing evidence pointing towards challenges in maintaining momentum. In some places, growing fatigue amongst some community activists and dips in the level of volunteering as furlough comes to an end, have come at the same time as it is recognised that levels of need are continuing to rise and are likely to endure way beyond the pandemic itself. This briefing draws on literature and primary research with 26 communities to explore the ways in which community action is and might be sustained.

Key points

- Community action has been defined using five dimensions: informal groups, working together, and working with others, on a voluntary basis, to address common problems. Each of these dimensions can be thought of as existing along a continuum (e.g. informal to formal).

- This provides a useful framework for considering how community action has changed during the pandemic. Shift can be identified, for example, from focusing on emergency food provision to maintaining wellbeing, and from informal action to more formalised and co-ordinated approaches.

- Levels of community action have ebbed and flowed throughout the COVID-19 crisis as some activists have experienced fatigue whilst others have been re-energised in responding to changing and emerging needs.

- Three sets of factors affect the sustainability of community action: individual (motivation, resource, experience and opportunity); group (resource, structure, culture and legitimacy); and community (assets, cohesion, threats and achievements).

- Questions remain, however, as to what role community action might play in both the short and long term, especially as we emerge from COVID-19, and how best to nurture and support it in ways which do not always assume that more is better.

This briefing is the 14th in a series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Briefings were published throughout 2020 and will continue through 2021 to share findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

Introduction

Over the last 18 months there has been a growing recognition of the power of communities to meet needs during crises (Alakeson and Brett, 2020; McCabe et al, 2020). The numbers coming forward to volunteer formally, or take part in more informal community action, has ebbed and flowed throughout COVID-19. Recently, however, concerns have been raised about exhaustion amongst some activists who have been involved in throughout, particularly given the recognition that rising levels of need, likely to endure beyond the pandemic, suggest an ongoing, enhanced, role for community action (McCabe et al, 2021).

Attention has turned to how to sustain community action, particularly in such a challenging context. Surprisingly little evidence exists, however, on exactly how community action is, or can be, sustained. Few of the key texts on community development, for example, include discussions on what sustains community action (for example, Popple, 2015; Ledwith, 2016; Gilchrist, 2019), largely leaving those involved to find out their own ways of keeping going. There is, however, a growing body of literature on volunteer retention (for example, Locke et al, 2003; Faletehan et al, 2021) which can provide some useful insights and frameworks, whilst recognising that volunteering is only one dimension of community action.

This briefing draws on existing evidence and primary research with 26 communities to explore the ways in which community action is being and might be sustained through the pandemic and beyond (see Local Trust's research page: _Communities responding to COVID-19_ for details). Community activists were asked in a participatory workshop to reflect upon the extent to which our emerging findings resonated with their experiences. This session also explored what the implications might be for the sustainability of community action in general, and for the work of their organisations in particular.

We start by examining the concept of community action, asking what it is, who does it, and how this has changed during the pandemic. We then move on to focus more specifically on how community action is sustained, highlighting three different sets of factors operating at the individual, group and community level which are influential. We conclude with reflections on what this might mean for community action post-pandemic.

What is community action, and how has it changed during the pandemic?

'Community' and 'action' are contested concepts (for example, Somerville, 2011). They mean different things to different people, and their meanings change over time and space. Bring them together and there is even less agreement on what they mean. While community action is the preferred term for this briefing, it is often used interchangeably with other concepts such as community development, community building, community engagement, community participation or involvement (Dominelli, 2006). Some of these terms have been criticised for being vague, imprecise, elastic concepts. A good starting point, however, is Richardson (2008, p.1), who defines community action as:

> "informal groups of people, acting on a voluntary basis, working together to solve common problems by taking action themselves, and with others."

The definition contains a number of different elements describing who undertakes community action, how it is organised, what it seeks to achieve, and how it goes about doing so. Each of the five dimensions mentioned within this definition are worthy of further attention:

1. **Informal groups**: Our research suggests that community action is made up of a mix of individuals and groups working through a blend of informal and formal approaches.

2. **Voluntary:** Our research suggests that community action is undertaken by a mixture of volunteers, activists and paid workers, some of whom do not want labels attached: as one workshop participant commented, "I'm not a volunteer. I just do things in my community". Paid workers can play a critical role in supporting community action (see [Briefing 3](#)).

3. **Common problems:** Our research suggests that community action addresses both short- and long-term problems, affecting individuals, groups of residents, and whole communities. Some activists interviewed stressed that their focus is on shared solutions and assets rather than problems.

4. **Working together:** Our research shows much collaboration between groups within communities, it has also found examples of competitions between groups, and important questions of who get involved and who gets excluded from community action (see Briefings [11](#) & [12](#)).

5. **Working with others:** Our research has highlighted the importance of, and variation in, joint working with local authorities in responses to the pandemic, but also other larger voluntary organisations, infrastructure bodies and funders such as Local Trust (see Briefings [9](#) & [10](#)).

Each of these dimensions, then, can be considered to exist on a continuum: from informal to formal, voluntary to paid, common problems to individual problems, working together to working separately, and from working with others to working alone. Often the action taking place within a community will be a combination of these elements, moving along these dimensions over time.

Learning from the pandemic

This provides a useful framework for considering how community action has changed during the pandemic. The diversity of community responses to COVID-19 as well as the diversity of pre-pandemic circumstances make it hard to identify definite trends, but our research suggests:

Informal groups: Towards the beginning of the pandemic there was a tendency towards more informal approaches, with the emergence of new individuals and groups of people being active within their communities. As time has passed, some of these groups have formalised, others have dissipated. Overtime, there has been a general reconfiguration of who does what, and how, within communities. As one community worker put it:

> "Some of the community activists have signed up with organisations they weren't part of before; rather than a group of loosely affiliated activists it's become more firm […], more organised, it's almost like a network has developed."

Voluntary: Many communities benefitted from an initial influx of new volunteers as people stepped forward to help out. Often, the level of volunteering has subsided over time particularly as furloughed workers have returned to their jobs. In some places there has been an increasing reliance on paid workers to stimulate and coordinate community action. While some communities have dense networks of community groups with numerous people involved, others have far sparser patterns of engagement and have tended to rely on external support and interventions. Further, our research suggests that community action can, disproportionately, rely on a handful of very active, committed individuals – the so called 'civic core' (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012).

Common problems: After an initial swift pivot of community action to focus on meeting basic needs in the early days of the pandemic, the last few months have seen greater attention being paid to longer-term, complex, challenges facing communities, which have been highlighted and/or exacerbated by the pandemic, such as debt, digital exclusion, growing levels of mental ill-health, inequality and unemployment. At the same time, however, some community groups have continued to address the same problems they always have, albeit often in new ways, adding to the diverse fabric of community action. Others have returned to earlier efforts that had been put on hold during lockdowns. How much residents were involved in identifying, prioritising and addressing these problems was raised as a question in a number of the communities involved in the research:

> "Our priority is to rebuild and restart resident-led planning and engagement, but it will be a hard, slow process after all this time [of COVID-19 restrictions]" (community worker).

Working together: While individuals, groups and organisations in some communities have pulled together and worked in partnerships, others have found it harder to do so. One community worker, for example, reflected "we have made so many new connections and contacts to build on in the future". Another talked about the challenges they experienced when trying to work with another community group who had "tried to take the limelight" during COVID-19. In part this reflected how things were prior to the pandemic:

> "Our normal approach has been to work in partnership, before COVID-19 and during, that is our approach, not to reinvent the wheel but if someone is doing it, seeing how we can help do it better." (local resident).

Who has done what within communities in response to COVID-19 is, at least in part, a result of pre-existing community conditions: which groups were already active, what they already did, what support and investment they had and how they worked together previously to meet community needs as a whole.

Working with others: Although there have been considerable differences between communities, there has been a general strengthening of relationships between communities and 'others' (for example, local authorities, larger voluntary organisations, private sector companies), often out of necessity. Some community activists, for example, have described being increasingly recognised as legitimate actors within wider COVID-19 responses. The hope is that where strengthened, these relationships will be sustained, lead to better partnership working and, ultimately, more effective community action.

How is community action sustained?

Early stories of an upsurge in community action, which particularly emphasised a growth in volunteers and emergence of mutual aid, have over time been tempered by growing concerns about how to maintain engagement. For some, energy levels have begun to wane, or activists have become ill (McCabe et al, 2021), and had to focus their attention elsewhere. Experiences are, however, varied. One community group involved in our research reported having 400 volunteers active in their community at the height of the pandemic, now down to (a still impressive) 250. However, another talked about having a more recent influx of volunteers, driven – they suggested – by a sense of people wanting to 'give back' as we move out of lock down and look to rebuild better. In both scenarios, activists are thinking about how to sustain participation in the longer term.

The Pathways through Participation (Brodie et al, 2011) project provides a useful framework for thinking about how community action is sustained, by demonstrating how people's participation changes over time. They identified four patterns:

- consistent and deep
- peaks and troughs
- consistent and light
- piecemeal and irregular.

Levels of participation are not static but fluctuate over time. Further, community development and participation literature highlights the different ways and levels at which individuals participate in their communities at any one time: as leaders, followers, temporary support participants, passive recipients, non-participants (Ellis, 2001; see also Pattie et al, 2004). Mohan and Bulloch (2012) talks about the 'civic core', a small group of the population who are responsible for a majority of country's voluntary efforts. While the focus of much of this literature is on individuals, we might think how this would translate to community action whereby the rhythms of individual participation interact with those of groups and communities. This suggests that we should not expect community action to be practiced or sustained at a consistent pace, but to vary between and within communities, and over time. Further, Ellis et al (2019, p.6) question whether community action can be considered a renewable resource, concluding that it needs considerable support if it is to be seen as such:

> "just as harnessing other sources of renewable energy (e.g. wind, sun) requires investment in the appropriate infrastructure, so too – we suggest - does voluntary and community support".

As one resident expressed it:

> "It feels in many ways we have lost a year. One frustration was in initial days of pandemic and first lockdown there was a lot of goodwill about, lots of people offering to do things, we wanted to harness that to get something longer lasting,

> but now what is becoming clear is that everyone is struggling to get volunteers. It seems as if a bit of volunteer fatigue or nervousness of coming out and getting involved."

Community responses during the pandemic should be considered as a particular moment within longer term trajectories of community action, which may fluctuate – in different directions – over time, becoming more or less intense and more or less productive. Indeed, a decline in activism could be seen in some cases as a success story: the common problem faced by the community has been resolved through a short, sharp, burst of activism and campaigning. Moreover, it may not always be desirable for all community action to be sustained – on an individual or collective level. A complex mix of factors influences whether or not it is sustained:

> "[partners] are tired. They have been doing this for a long time and are ready to move on. Need to move on. But they won't, as they want to hang on to a bit of power. They are afraid if they leave that money will go to places they don't feel it should so they hang on but without doing the work."
> (Local resident).

The more challenging aspects of community action hinted at within this quotation – the holding onto power by a few activists, and the impact that can have in terms of excluding other community members, for example - are rarely examined in the literature (Gilchrist 2019).

Indeed, existing evidence has surprisingly little to say about how community action is sustained. As something of an exception, Nkansa and Chapman (2006) identified eight dimensions which affect the sustainability of community-level activities (based on research on education projects in Ghana): planning, transparency, leadership, participation, social cohesion, resources, community skills and the valuing of education. They found leadership and social cohesion to be the two most vital elements. Brodie et al (2011) identified sets of factors which explained why participation starts, continues or stops:

Starts = motivation **+** trigger + resource **+** opportunity

Continues = good quality experience **+** resource

Stops = poor quality experience **or** lack of resource **or** life event

More narrowly, existing volunteering literature offers some insights on volunteer retention, highlighting the significance of both personal and organisational factors which can lead to people stay or leave volunteering (for example Locke et al, 2003). Social aspects - including high levels of social integration, the creation of a collective identity, and the reinforcement of social solidarity - have been highlighted as particularly important in explaining long term commitment to (sports-based) volunteering. A review by Kristiansen et al (2015, p. 257), for example, noted:

> "…the key social processes (e.g. socialisation, institutionalisation) that helped create a collective/community identity based on pride and solidarity, which in turn was sustained and reinforced through continued engagement (volunteering) and resistance to perceived external 'powers'".

Together, these different bodies of literature point to the importance of considering individual, group/organisation and community level factors for understanding how community action is sustained. We combine and apply these frameworks to data collected about responses to COVID-19 from the 26 communities this research focused on.

Individual level factors

Following Brodie et al (2011), we found that what sustains community action at an individual level is a combination of motivation, resource, experience and opportunity.

Motivations

The reasons that people give for initially getting involved in community action are not necessarily the same as those that keep them involved. Many of those who have been active in their communities during the pandemic were already involved. Many originally got involved because they felt passionate about something: an issue, activity, group, or their community in general. Being part of the response to COVID-19 was often an extension of these wider, more enduring, motives. Some residents talked about how COVID-19 had renewed their motivation, how it has "given activists their purpose back". Others got involved in their communities for the first time, often with a clear sense of wanting to do something practical to help others at a time of crisis. Making a difference, with the associated sense of achievement, and recognising ongoing needs were important reasons to keep going. Some of those who had had to withdraw from community action during COVID-19 were finding it hard to re-engage even as restrictions were eased, "I've been shielding for so long I've lost my motivation" (local resident).

Resources

To take part in community action people draw on different kinds of individual/personal resources. Indeed, a lack of resource was identified as a key barrier to getting involved, "people around here are just struggling to survive never mind organise things locally" (community worker). Time, money, energy, emotional resilience, confidence and support networks were all identified as important personal resources required to start and continue as community activists. For some, the pandemic was associated with a greater availability of time for community action, through furlough schemes meaning they were not at work, and/or restrictions on travel and socialising. As those restrictions eased, however, this was no longer the case, resulting in some people stepping back from community action. For others, the pandemic was associated with greater pressures on their time through, for example, increased caring responsibilities and home schooling. For community leaders, who are often active in multiple groups, responding to COVID-19 was particularly demanding on their time, and required considerable energy and emotional resilience. The risks of burnout were highlighted:

One worker said that it was "sheer dogged determination" that kept them going. Others talked about the importance of being able to switch-off through creative outlets such as writing, art, gardening, walking, and of drawing on personal support networks to help keep them going. Community action can also have financial costs for individuals, which can affect whether people were able to sustain their involvement, "you can give your time for free, but we can't afford petrol" as one local resident explained.

Experience

How someone experiences community action can make a difference to whether or not they keep participating; this can be particularly important in high-tension situations such as the pandemic. Existing research stresses the importance of conviviality, sociability, and enjoyment for sustaining action. McCabe and Phillimore (2017 p.56), for example, concluded:

"...in the long term it is the social nature of community groups that kept people engaged".

The pandemic has made it harder to build social interaction between community activists, with the majority noting that they have missed face to face interaction. It can be particularly difficult to resolve any tensions when meeting virtually. This had led to some people dropping out:

"I kept going for seven years because I enjoyed it – then it all fell apart" (Local resident).

The importance of recognition was also highlighted – an acknowledgement that what you are doing is worthwhile and is appreciated. Some felt that the immediate nature of the issues that they were dealing with in response to COVID-19 enabled a greater sense of achievement than the longer-term community action they had been involved in. Others, however, felt that their efforts had gone unrecognised for too long, with the pandemic acting as the tipping point, leading them to withdraw. One particularly active community leader, for example, 'retired' after eight years feeling that others "did not recognise the amount of time I was giving and did not value that amount of commitment" (Local resident). A simple "thank you" can go a long way. Also important is the level of autonomy and ownership people are afforded within their community action: "a big lesson is not to jump in and rescue people, but allow them to blossom", as one community worker put it. Autonomy, however, needs to be balanced with organisation and support. One group reflected that pre-COVID-19 they had a strong network of volunteers, but as a result of the (paid) volunteer coordinator being put in furlough the numbers of volunteers involved had dropped as there was no one there to support them.

Opportunity

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of opportunities to both starting and sustaining community action. Early on in the pandemic it was clear that in some communities there were more people putting themselves forward to help out than there were opportunities available for them to fulfil. Similarly, some communities have found it hard to find ways to keep people involved as community action has evolved during the pandemic and they have no longer had suitable roles for people to undertake. Conversely, changing community responses over the course of the pandemic have provided some activists with new avenues for engagement. For example, there were those who had not volunteered in the early stages with food distribution but had subsequently become active in organising events and activities to promote wellbeing. Bureaucracy was a barrier for some where Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks were seen as a requirement but were actually unnecessary, and in some cases, there was a mismatch between opportunities available, and the ways in which individuals wanted to help out:

> "…it is not just about meetings – it is about people chipping in and doing things… We need to provide those opportunities to chip in… so more practical and not just meetings about abstract stuff" (Local resident).

Group/ organisational level factors

Four key sets of group/organisational level factors were identified as being particularly important for sustaining community action: resources; strategy and structure; culture and values; legitimacy.

Resources

Group/organisational resources required to sustain community action through and beyond the pandemic included people, finance and technology. The risk to groups which relied on a small number of key individuals had been highlighted by the pandemic, particularly when those people were forced to isolate. This had led, in some groups, to a renewed effort to get more people involved:

> "The individual becomes the strength and the weakness of the project, they are vital to driving it forward, but also a single point of weakness, the project is so reliant on one person…. It's one person deep, until it gets up and running. … That dynamic has changed for the good of the project, the individual can't carry on for ever." (community worker).

Kemmis (2010) identifies activities not being financially viable in the long term as a barrier to sustained community action. The long-term funding available to many of the community groups involved in this research through Big Local or Creative Civic Change, combined with short term funding available through COVID-19 emergency grants, meant that money was not identified as a widespread short-term challenge to group/organisational sustainability. However, looking forward, some groups were concerned about their longer-term financial viability, including questioning whether they had the knowledge and skills available within the group to generate funding when existing sources ran out. Alongside people and money, groups also recognised the importance of technology as a resource required to

sustain community action, particularly in the context of COVID-19 when communication and much activity had been forced online. This was both a capacity (did they have the technology) and a capability (did they have the technological knowhow) issue.

Strategy and structure

Regardless of how informally or formally organised, the importance of having a clear, agreed upon, strategy and structure for groups was highlighted as important factor in sustaining community action. For some, COVID-19 had enabled a period of reflection, strategic thinking and provided an opportunity to reflect on, and refine, longer term plans. One group, for example, had been able to develop a new strategy for one of their projects during lockdown, and they hoped that this would help to ensure their future sustainability. Others talked about the importance of having robust, but also flexible, systems, procedures and processes in place, enabling them to balance longer term priorities with shorter term demands.

Culture and values

The culture, values and behaviours adopted by groups were also identified as being important for their sustainability, both in terms of their strength and alignment. In particular, a can-do attitude, a sense of positivity, and fairness were identified as important. One community group talked about how many others within their area had closed down during COVID-19 whereas they had kept themselves going, with a motto developing: "we can, we can, we can; we have, we have, we have". Negativity within a group could wear it down, while an unequal distribution of labour could leave some individuals feeling disgruntled at "being the ones who do all the work" leaving to fractions developing within groups. The local nature of community action made these issues particularly pertinent, as one person described: "When things get difficult issues can be very full on between partners and workers as everyone lives locally".

Legitimacy

Being recognised as credible, fulfilling an important function, and meeting real need were identified as an important factor in keeping groups going. For some, this was something that had developed as a result of their response to the pandemic: "I think now they (the local council) will see us as needing us because we've got the backing of our communities" (Local resident). This was not only about being recognised as legitimate by others, but also an internal sense of being needed and making a positive contribution to the community, of what they could achieve:

> "We were the only organisation that kept going throughout COVID and it showed how much the community needed us" (community worker).

Community level factors

Four key sets of community level factors were identified as being particularly important for sustaining community action: assets, cohesion, threats, achievement.

Assets

Existing assets were highlighted as key community-level factors which affect the establishment and sustainability of community action. These included: community buildings and spaces, infrastructure and leadership. When community buildings were closed during lockdown it was harder for people to get together, for communication to be maintained and spirits to be upheld, which in turn could affect the sustainability of community action

(see Briefing 13 for a full discussion on the role of community hubs). More broadly, this research has highlighted the importance of community-led infrastructure (McCabe et al 2021: see also Briefing 8) for supporting community responses to COVID-19, and for sustaining community action more generally. The importance of community leadership was also highlighted. This was talked about in terms of the presence of community leaders - key, active individuals and/or groups, who linked together others: "I feel like I'm in the middle of a wheel... threading people together" as one community worker described the role they played. But also, the importance of distributed leadership; ensuring that others within the community are empowered to get involved and so both the burden and benefits of participation are spread across the community and the chances of sustaining community action are enhanced.

Cohesion

Existing literature talks about the importance of "local cooperation and place bound networks" (Kenny et al, 2015, p.17), "networks of solidarity and trust" (Gilchrist, 2019, p.190), and of social cohesion (Nkansa and Chapman, 2006) within communities for community action to flourish. Our research broadly echoed these findings, with the strength of identity, belonging, community spirit, solidarity and cohesion within communities all noted as shaping and sustaining community action. Indeed, it was suggested that the ways in which communities had responded to COVID had helped strengthen connections within the community:

> "I've lived in [this area] most of my life and one good thing about COVID... I know the neighbours on my street a lot better. And it's not just stopping for a chat. It's swapping things, swapping food, passing on information about where to go and who to speak to. It's very informal. But it works" (Local resident).

Conversely, tensions between individuals and groups within communities were highlighted as barriers to the establishment and sustainability of community action at a community-level, some of these tensions can be long standing, and hard to resolve. It is important to note, however, that in some communities the level of threat posed by COVID-19 in early 2020 facilitated a collaborative response between diverse groups in those communities and evidenced a high degree of co-ordination. Yet in others, responses were much more fragmented and often organised around faith or ethnic identities. These responses were, in themselves, valuable but risked leading to duplication of efforts and competition for resources and funding.

Threat

The ebbs and flows of action throughout the pandemic reflect both the level of perceived threat to the community and the changing nature of those threats. During the first lockdown, the danger was clear and present, with urgent needs in many communities for food and the distribution of basic necessities. Over the summer of 2020, and subsequently, the threat has been perceived in terms of mental (as well as long-term physical) health and the emphasis shifted accordingly to organising positive activities to promote wellbeing. By the ending of lockdowns in July 2021, the nature of those threats had changed again in anticipation of rising levels of unemployment, mental ill health and poverty. It is those imminent threats that have sustained community action in some areas – though there are some uncertainties about how best to respond to those threats and what the role of community action might be.

Achievement

As discussed above, recognition of (and thanks for) what has been contributed and achieved is important for sustaining community action at an individual level; it is also important at a collective, community level. The response of some communities to COVID-19 acted as tangible demonstration of what they had and could achieve when working together. This in itself, it was hoped, would help to build or sustain momentum for community action in the future. Further, however, it was acknowledged that it was important not just to be able to see what communities had achieved, but also to actively celebrate those achievements. Rather than adopting the media language of 'heroes', however, the importance of local celebrations focusing on collective – rather than individual - efforts was highlighted.

Conclusions: Looking to the future of community action

The role and contribution of community action in responses to COVID-19 has been rightly celebrated, particularly in recognition of the speed with which communities organised and responded and the ways in which those responses adapted as the pandemic evolved. The value of community action has, at last, been recognised in policy terms.

As time has gone on, however, new questions have emerged about how to sustain community action. What starts community action (for example, an immediate and passionate response to a crisis) is not necessarily the same as what keeps it going (for example, mutual support and access to resources). As the pandemic has evolved, new opportunities have emerged for community action and activists have learnt much about how to work together in new ways. Along with the opportunities, however, have come new challenges, not least of which is the scale and the complexity of the problems community action may seek to address, and how to balance the need to remedy immediate problems such as food and housing insecurity alongside longer term challenges such as community well-being. This briefing has provided a framework for thinking about what needs to be in place to sustain community action at an individual, group and community level. There remain, however, a number of unknowns, not least of which is at what level and in what form community action might be expected to be sustained at, and why.

The longer term emotional and health impacts of sustained activism on those involved throughout COVID-19 remains largely unexplored. Whilst much has been said about the impact of the pandemic on health professionals, similar attention has yet to be paid to the costs of emotional labour on grassroots activists and groups (Anderson, 2017). Further, activists are increasingly asking what is it reasonable to expect communities to do in terms of responding to emerging issues, such as debt and mental health. Do they have the skills, knowledge or inclination to do so? Is it appropriate? With continuing cuts to local authority and other budgets, at the same time as needs continue to rise, it is likely that community activists will be expected to do ever more with even fewer resources. There is a real risk that they become overwhelmed by the weight of expectation. Understanding how best to support and nurture community action, in times of both crisis and calm, in ways which recognise its natural ebbs and flows and that do not always assume that more is better, becomes key.

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About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

These are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme

- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme

- areas categorised as "left behind" because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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